

2017-01-11

# Including students as co-enquirers: matters of identity, agency, language and labelling in an International participatory research study

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/8248>

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10.1016/j.ijer.2016.11.008

International Journal of Educational Research

Elsevier BV

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**Abstract:**

This paper takes the reader through the methodological development of an international study, which involved 8 academics and 373 students in Departments of Education from 6 universities in Europe, New Zealand and the USA. It explores the uses, benefits and critical tensions within participatory research methodology when used in a study addressing questions of undergraduate student diversity and inclusion. Issues when linking the views and interests of the various project parties, a core element of participatory research, are considered. Alongside this is a discussion on how this led to shifts in participant role identities, a reconfiguration of research ownership and insights into the complexities of participants' education. The work addresses a niche area in terms of participants as co-researchers, in particular matters of identity, agency, language and labelling, thus adding to developments in this field.

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### **Introduction:**

This article reports on an international study that was funded by the UK's Higher Education Academy, a national body which was created to support and research teaching excellence in Higher Education (HE). The study aimed to gain critical insight into the discourse of diversity and inclusion in higher education. In particular, it sought to locate where these terms exist, reflect on questions of their legitimacy, and gain an understanding of the education experiences of students positioned by their institution as 'diverse', these students were essential to the study. The study was conducted over a ten-month period November 2013 - August 2014 and took place in 6 universities: 2 in the USA (urban Los Angeles, California, and rural central New Hampshire), 3 in Europe (2 in the UK and 1 in Cyprus), and 1 in New Zealand (NZ)<sup>1</sup>. A total of 8 academics and 373 students were involved in the work. Each university has a significant number of undergraduate students studying Education in either initial teacher education or Arts based programmes. Individual programme numbers across the 6 universities varied from 400 - 700. Whilst there was variation in terms of curriculum and programme structure, each of the 8 academics taught within a similar field, broadly speaking that of inclusive education and 'diversity', which constituted a core element of all programmes. In terms of the academic links, we know one another through international research and publications along with visits and established friendships.

The paper begins with the study context as linked to international policy development and the discourse of Inclusive Education, its purposes and complexities, alongside a reflection on the need for on-going research to prepare graduates of education for their work in an increasingly challenging world. Next, discussion is provided on the study's methodology participatory research, its purpose, rationale and how its ethos, along with the 8 academics' political positions, linked to core elements of the research: matters of identity, agency, language and labelling. The work's contribution to the field is through connection to Nind's (2011) view that 'participants as co-researchers' is a noteworthy subject due to its absence in participatory research (PR) literature and to Welikala and Atkin's (2014) stance that collaborative research creates alternative and contrasting views on student experience. The work's originality is found by its taking the reader through the study's methodological development, mapping and

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<sup>1</sup> For reasons of anonymity we will not refer to the universities by name when illustrating our points with reference to focus group/questionnaire responses. Thus, we will now refer to the participating universities as university A, B, C, D and E.

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exploring the shifts and changes. Final reflections held by participants suggest using PR and understanding its potential as a political agent, enabled them to grasp the significance of their role as co-researchers. The work concludes with some final questions and reflections on participatory research, a methodology which was initially experienced as ambiguous but became clear in changes made via engagement with our participants. It can be argued that PR's general rationale not only allows for methodological changes, but also promotes such manoeuvring through the dialectical exchange of all project stakeholders who, in terms of this methodology, are ideally positioned as equals in terms of roles, participation and power. Whilst we do not maintain that our participants, students and academics, worked as equals we would argue this core aspect of PR challenged us profoundly, causing much reflection and supporting connections to each other.

<b>Study context</b>
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Contemporary international higher education policy emphasises more equitable access to university for underrepresented student groups (Quinn, 2013; Allen, Storan and Thomas, 2005; HEFCE, 2014; Quinn, 2013). This is known in the UK as Widening Participation (WP) (HEFCE, 2014) and its equivalent exists in the other countries where this study took place, for example:

- USA – U.S. Department of Education (2012), OECD (2010-2012), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Civil Rights Law) Accommodations and Americans with Disabilities Act access requirements.
- New Zealand - Tertiary Education Strategy (2014-2019); Disability Strategy (2001).
- Cyprus - Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture (2010).

The impact of the wider access discourse can be seen with the growth of level 6 courses in Further and Higher Education (FHE) colleges, increased numbers of mature, part-time students, students with disabilities, and students from challenging socio-economic backgrounds, as well as the recent increase in awarding university status to HE colleges in the

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UK and Cyprus (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012; Gale and Hodge, 2014; Independent Commission on Fees, 2014). We can also see the impact in New Zealand with the government's commitment to increasing numbers of Maori and Pasifika students in higher education, and in similar ways in the USA as noted in related references above.

Each of the study's institutions market themselves as vanguards for 'diversity' and providers of inclusive education which, as a concept in terms of meaning and purpose, is widely debated (Ahmed, 2012; Shyman, 2015). We, the eight academics, position ourselves as self-reflexive pedagogues who regularly question our teaching approaches and their impact in terms of our cultural mediation within and across the Academy (Trahar, 2011).

As practitioner researchers we reflect regularly on our pedagogy and our position in terms of political views, values and identities. We also aspire to further develop our own and our institutions' cultural capabilities, meaning: *the ability to understand different values and systems and to challenge one's own thinking and behaviour about them* (Trahar 2011, p. 47). Discourse regarding cultural capabilities, assertions as to its place and purpose in HE, are connected with other discourses such as 'internationalisation', 'globalisation' and/or 'inclusion and diversity'. In terms of the latter, 'inclusion and diversity', the central purpose, as understood in policy and disseminated in much related institution provision and promotion, is that of social justice and equal rights. However, there are counter arguments. Certain sources argue recent mass expansion in HE is linked to a dominant neoliberal logic as opposed to that of social justice, thus widening access for equality becomes an imaginary, sweet coating for the bitter pill of profit and product expansion (Gale and Hodge, 2014; Watson, 2013).

Linked to this, international figures reveal high dropout rates and failure amongst 'diverse' students (Madriaga, Hanson, Kay and Walker, 2007; Quinn, 2011). Research also suggests a continuing lack of engagement at policy and practice levels with 'diverse' students, ignoring their potential as key stakeholders contributing to discussions on necessary changes to practice (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012). Alongside this runs the language debate, the use and misuse of the label 'diverse' and the political positioning of students on either side of this binary, (Gibson et al, 2016; Kimura, 2014). It was through a process of reflection, questioning and dialogue - both solitary and collaboratively - that we 8 colleagues decided upon a study to explore what 'diversity' is, how it becomes manifest and where it is located in terms of student identity, institution position, response and subsequent student experience. This article will not provide

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a detailed exploration of our study's findings, they are reported elsewhere (Gibson et al; 2016). It is noteworthy however to report that our respondents called for change and disruption to current institutionalised forms of provision. They considered that institutional language and connected practices served to ostracise rather than include. This challenge to previously established form was further reflected in the disruption, challenges and changes that occurred to the study's methodology.

### **Methodology- an original plan and its challenges.**

Participatory research is one of a number of terms used to describe approaches which *involve a range of stakeholders as participants in the planning and conduct of research and in the knowledge development that arises from those shared processes* (Braye and McDonald, 2013, p. 268). Some consider it an emerging qualitative paradigm (Heron and Reason, 1997), and it appears as such in the latest iteration of Denzin and Lincoln's Handbook of Qualitative Research (2011).

Much participatory research emphasises the need for research processes to engage with participants on an equal platform or as equal as is possible, to enable the views and stories of those being researched to be heard clearly and without re- or mis-interpretation by the researchers. There is also the view that key research outputs will be practical, resulting in positive developments to the lives of the research participants.

Although only recently developed in higher education (Seale, 2010), participatory research is not a new phenomenon. However, the role of participants in data analysis and the evaluation of findings is relatively recent, ambiguous and often neglected (Welikala and Atkin, 2014). Nind (2011, p. 352) notes how data analysis has been recognised as a missing dimension of participatory research and there *are few examples of participatory interpretation and analysis of data*. Nind's (2011) work focuses upon children and people with disabilities; she critiques the label 'disability', positioning it as a social construct, and argues that recent uses of participatory approaches reflect paradigm shifts in the way society positions 'the disabled'. This is connected to global debates on voice, social justice and inclusion. Our work problematizes HE's usage of the label 'diverse', and the term's mis-use in re-positioning institutionally targeted students (Gibson et al; 2016). We allude to the 'diverse' student as a

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misnomer, a social construct, created by HE's middle class neoliberal culture, hegemony and its need to categorise and control. We argue that studies which aim for participants to act as co-enquirers are political by their nature. In keeping with this position, Welikala and Atkin note that collaboration with students as co-enquirers leads to richer critical subjectivity and opportunities for enhanced student experience. They state (2014, p. 392) *research collaboration between researchers and students create alternative and participative worldviews about student experience reflecting the full range of contrasting and affirming contextual data*. Our study adds to this debate through its collaboration with participants as co-enquirers. Whilst the participation of our students in the data analysis was an aim of our work from the outset, we had not considered just how challenging and rich that process could be. We, the academics, had initially worked from our traditional spaces and identities and found the re-positioning from academic authority figure to co-participants with our students difficult. The academics' political pedagogy connects to questions of social justice, in both its curriculum form, what we teach, which sits external to the self, and in its biographical, political manifestations, that is, our locational self and its related complexities in terms of what and who we bounce into and off whilst being and doing within the academy. These positions drew us towards participatory research, as we aimed to engage our sample population with the research method, to invite their views and insights in terms of both data collection and analysis, and furthermore to seek their input when compiling our findings and presenting the work. Thus our work responds positively to Nind's (2011) argument that participatory methodology needs to move forward incorporating participants' interpretation and analysis of data. It is also in line with Welikala and Atkin's (2014) suggestions, in its creation of alternative and contrasting views on student experience.

It was our aim that the academics who initiated the project and the students who acted as participants would work with one another in collaborative ways to allow for various views to be valued, stories to be told and interaction in our different roles to take place. Ideally we hoped this approach would allow for the creation of a space where power, as manifest in institutionalised role status e.g. academic versus student, could be challenged and the study- its methods, data collection and analysis- would emerge through participant collaborative and dialectical engagement.

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In the early stages of the work, the 8 academics worked collaboratively to devise a study using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The work's focus was within HE, in particular to understand institutionalised processes of positioning and defining undergraduate students as 'diverse' and the subsequent impact. We began with the following research questions:

- Within HE, how are 'diverse' students defined?
- What enables effective learning relationships to be established at university for institutionally positioned 'diverse' students?
- What positive and negative learning experiences have institutionally positioned 'diverse' students had before embarking on university careers and during their undergraduate studies?
- What relationships or links in the university act as support for institutionally positioned 'diverse' students?
- What could the university, or specific aspects of it, do better or provide more/less of to meet institutionally positioned 'diverse' students' learning and wider student experience needs?
- On the basis of focus group discussions, what practical recommendations and/or policy developments are suggested as potentially beneficial for institutionally positioned 'diverse' students?

Uses of the term 'diverse' or diversity when we developed our methodology was something which grew from and was responsive to our political position in terms of the principles, values and ethos of participatory research. These informed how we perceived the work, what we hoped it might achieve and how we responded when methodological challenges- an inevitable aspect of research - presented themselves.

The tools we set out to use were an online survey and focus groups, where undergraduate education students could give input on their views and understandings of the term 'diversity', how 'diversity' was reflected in their learning experiences, and how, for those who considered themselves to be part of a 'diverse' student group, barriers became manifest in their learning and university engagement. In practical terms the study firstly involved participants responding to an online questionnaire from which a number of students were invited to focus groups. At this stage they were asked to engage in focus group dialogue and to conduct data analysis of



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the dialogue. It is this aspect of the work which connects it to the participatory paradigm; our respondents were not seen as a sample population but instead they were invited to engage in processes of data analysis and dissemination. As the study got under way we experienced methodological complexity in relation to language and communication, participant roles, and connected with that, matters of agency and power. Aspects of the study's findings link to these methodological themes. In sum, challenges, whether becoming manifest due to language or communication matters, or role ambiguity, acted to disrupt and reformulate the work. They caused pieces of the original research design to fall out of place, arguably creating a more equitable methodological approach with our participants. Hall (2014) refers to disruptive methodological practices as enabling indigenous sample populations' views to operate more fully, taking their significant place in the processes and design of research work, thus validating research findings in more representative ways. She states, (2014, p. 382)

*[...] the significant shift that is required in order for indigenous people to feel comfortable and open to 'research' will not happen through approaches that tinker at the edges. Research must be fundamentally reinvented through the knowledge, understandings, experiences and values of Indigenous people.*

Whilst Hall's work focuses on Indigenous communities in Australia, and critiques the complexities of power and western definitions of credible research methodologies, there is a connection to other research genres. In particular, research which works from a social justice position aims to understand and address exclusion and oppression and to uncover the places and spaces where this occurs. The following section explores the study's methodological challenges.

### **Methodological challenges – Emergent themes**

The original study methodology emphasised the dialectical processes we would aim for, that is allowing for involvement and interaction with our student participants and academic researchers. Impending changes were considered on the basis of insights from various participants. As challenges arose we considered them in light of Ahmed (2012) and others

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(Gibson 2015; Hall, 2014) who advise that if we are genuinely attempting to redistribute knowledge and power as per our social justice position, then we need to allow for that which challenges, pushes against the established flow and causes discomfort. In adhering to the study's ethics and the political rationale of our work, we allowed for challenges to play out, to feel the disruption and stand back whilst pieces of our clearly structured methodology fell out of place. The following subsections give an overview of two methodological themes which highlight the study's challenges and complexities: communication and language and role and agency.

### **Communication and Language: Questions of 'diversity'**

Whilst planning the study's online questionnaire and focus groups, the academic researchers deliberated over the term 'diversity' in particular, finding tension and exploring the politics regarding its origin and uses in the academy. The first emerging question was who or what is defining the 'diversity' in 'diverse' student? Our study set out to engage with students who had first-hand experience of being positioned by external sources as 'diverse'. We had an awareness of the tension involved when using the language or label 'diversity' hence why we place it in inverted commas.

When considering institutionalised language and the discomfort it caused we came back regularly to the same questions: what does 'diversity' mean, who decides what is 'diverse', where or who is the authority behind this and does its current form serve to further alienate rather than engage and liberate? Ahmed and Swain (2006, p. 96) problematize 'diversity' arguing that *it individuates difference, conceals inequalities and neutralises histories of antagonism and struggle*. It may be argued that 'diversity' as a reference point or label colonises the language of equal rights and equal opportunities, arguably resetting thinking and dialogue such that the focus is no longer on historic horrors or reasons as to why a discourse of equality first came into being. With 'diversity', explicit matters of discrimination and oppression become something that is in and of the past. Such matters are not visible in the bright smiling multi-coloured faces of a 'diverse' and happy campus as seen on many current University websites.

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From that problematic space we developed a questionnaire to select students with a range of ‘diversities’ who were willing to take part in the focus groups (FGs). In our attempts to represent various aspects of what institutions might consider ‘diverse’, we referred to the equal opportunities and/or widening participation and access policies within our 6 universities alongside university student application processes and UK government statistics and figures (HEFCE, 2016). Many of these sources asked questions regarding gender, disability, ethnicity, marriage status, sexuality, carer responsibilities, family background and religious beliefs. These categories appear as defining indicators of a ‘diverse’ student. As noted, whilst we find the positioning of people by external sources as problematic, a process which may lead to further exclusion as opposed to inclusion, we nevertheless made use of established categories. We did this in order to access students who had been externally positioned, institutionally labelled and categorised as ‘diverse’.

The initial online SurveyMonkey™ questionnaire contained 25 questions, 6 that could be used to give an indication of ‘diversity’ as shown in Table 1. Further questions related to the respondents’ experience of support in their HE institution and to further participation in the study. The questionnaire was sent to all undergraduate students within the Education Faculty/Department at each of the 6 universities.

	Question	Response Options	
1.	Could you please indicate your gender?	Male Female Transsexual	Transgender Prefer not to say
2.	Could you please indicate your age range?	Under 18 18-20 21-24 25-30	31-40 41-50 51-60 60+

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3.	Could you please indicate your sexuality?	Heterosexual (opposite sex attraction)  Homosexual (same sex attraction)	Bisexual (both sex attraction)  Prefer not to say
4.	Could you please indicate your ethnicity?	White  Maori  Indigenous Australian  Latino/a  Native American  Pasifika  European  Black	Black African  Black other  Indian  Pakistani  Bangladeshi  Chinese  Asian other  Other (please specify)
5.	If you have an impairment or impairments could you tell me what type you have?	Blind or serious visual impairment uncorrected by glasses  Deaf or serious hearing impairment  A physical impairment or mobility issues, such as difficulty using arms or using a	A social/communication impairment such as Asperger's Syndrome/other autistic spectrum disorder  A specific learning difficulty, such as dyslexia, dyspraxia or AD(H)D  Another disability, impairment or medical condition  Not applicable  Prefer not to say

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		<p>wheelchair or crutches</p> <p>Mental health condition, such as depression, schizophrenia or anxiety disorder</p> <p>A long-standing illness or health condition, such as cancer, HIV, diabetes, chronic heart disease, or epilepsy</p>
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**Table1: Questionnaire questions related to indicators of ‘diversity’.**

SurveyMonkey™ generated a spreadsheet, which listed students’ answers. A column was added on the spreadsheet beside each ‘diversity’ reference which provided further insight as to how many categories of ‘diversity’ respondents considered they were linked to.

Of all 373 respondents, over half indicated they were not ‘diverse’ on measures used. Over a quarter had a limited indication of ‘diversity’, ticking one category, 19% indicated some level of ‘diversity’ on 2 or more areas (< a fifth), however, no one ticked 5 or 6 categories. All students who had identified themselves as ‘diverse’ were invited to participate in a focus group. This resulted in focus groups of between 5 – 10 students at each centre. Due to the debateable use of the label ‘diverse’ in institutional categorisation and student positioning, we did not differentiate on the basis of how many categories were ticked; a connection to one was sufficient for inclusion in the FG stage. We were keen to engage with students who chose to position themselves in one or more categories, as well as those who had been positioned by their University. This alongside the qualitative emphasis of our methodology and our political stance prevented us from setting the choice of focus group student beyond more than one category.

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The purposes of the research were explained via emailed invitations and consent forms were completed in the first FG by those willing and able to participate further. Facilitators sent out questions and a pre-reading to aid FG members' thinking and preparation. A discussion about the label 'diversity' and how FG members related to this term was recorded during the first FG. Subsequent FGs were a follow on from the key findings of the first with more discussion and debate.

When the online questionnaire was piloted by international centre facilitators, one of the centre facilitators commented that the list of categories did not give sufficient consideration to other minority groups represented in their university. It was first suggested at University C that the following categories be added: Latino/a and Native American. As a result of this, other centre facilitators were asked to add information regarding their ethnic student groups. University B suggested: Maori, European and Paskifica. When the study was being distributed further clarification was needed for students in University C, and the following addition was made by the centre facilitator:

*Item 6 (Ethnicity) reflects British ethnic breakdowns. If you do not fit any of the provided categories (and many of you won't), please indicate OTHER and specify your ethnicity.*

The additions of other ethnic groups caused a further difficulty in the analysis stage. As European had been added this meant some respondents from University D selected European (over 1/5 of respondents, 19/ 90). The researchers encountered a different challenge from University E, where being Latina/o was not considered being diverse as just under half, 10 of University E's 22 (45%) respondents selected Latina/o, meaning that being Latina/o could be considered typical and not an indication of diversity. This caused us to question the conception of 'diversity' of ethnicity we had engaged with – under-represented ethnic groups but under-represented where? Nationally, regionally or at a university level, and from whose position?

A further aspect of missing categories was illustrated in University A's focus group data, where it was evident a missing label has the potential to cause offence:

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*[when] changing my name [I encountered] the bureaucracy of university forms. 'Civil partnership' wasn't on there- driving license, passport, marriage certificate but Civil Partnership certificate wasn't on there. [...] it's the point that not putting that on there makes me feel I'm not equal, I'm not the same. I'm not valued.*

In University C one of the participants who had come into the study based on her identified disability revealed during the conversation that she is, and has been over time, experiencing homelessness. This category of 'diversity' was of more significance to her than the identified disability, yet we had not included the category of homelessness as part of our questionnaire.

There is also a tension recognised by one focus group participant in University A: *It's weird, because I don't like labelling. But when sexuality isn't on the form I feel I'm being ignored and then when it's on the form it's like well, why is it any of their business? It's really weird - two sides of my brain battling with each other!*

In University B there was a sense of minority labels being used to describe something in a derogatory fashion. One student reports a conversation with a lecturer with whom she had a good relationship:

*He described it as a "gay magazine" and it's nothing to do with sexuality. It was, "oh it's just one of those 'gay' university magazines". And I don't think he realised but my face just dropped [...] I would just call them [my peers] out on it-explain why I don't find that it's nothing to do with the fact that I have possibly a different sexuality to a lot you know, maybe that's my 'other', I'm not sure but like I just think as humans we can't talk like that anymore. It's not acceptable anymore and I just found that completely offensive. It to me feels similar to whether he said "oh, it's just one of those 'black' magazines" you know, as a negative word.*

The categorising issue reflects ongoing debates within 'labelling' discourse, the question of how or if one labels, along with recognising that the impact and/or rationale is layered with

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complexities and nuance (Grenier, 2010; Klotz, 2004). Conversations and debates about that decision, its related practices and impact upon student life or study experience, was perceived as necessary in our study and encouraged by our participants.

We came to the study with an awareness of how cultural mediation can work to redefine and reject ideas which disrupt, how institutionalised hegemony operates and with the view that HE as a global phenomenon has become saturated with neo-liberal rather than social justice drivers and values. Thus whilst one might position our study as another example of institutionalised spin on ‘diversity’ with aims to produce an almanac or tips for the inclusive practitioner, that was not how we envisaged it nor what it became. We engaged with the dominant institutional discourse, embraced the discomfort this caused us and decided to use the language, the label ‘diverse’, in our research tools when seeking out our sample population. We needed to hear from them, ‘the labelled diverse’, their thoughts in terms of how and why HE had positioned them and what impact resultant institutionalised practices or provisions had. As explored above, we didn’t use it without critical consideration, and we considered whether the use of a questionnaire was appropriate for such a study, but in the end, our justification was that it linked us directly to the relevant institutionally labelled population.

### **Finding agency and clarifying roles**

Cook-Sather (2012) problematizes research which fails to grant agency to those being researched as potentially replicating that which has gone before- in terms of its practice and findings. She reflects on the tensions and challenges involved when research studies attempt to give power to those being researched (Cook-Sather, 2012, pp. 352-353): *Inviting students to be not only respondents but also authorities and agents in research ...challenges deep-seated social and cultural assumptions about the capacity of learners.* This challenge became manifest in our study in particular at the research planning and our question development stages. Our questions and methodology were written in advance of student participation; thus our student participants were not involved in the early planning phase. This raises questions as to claims the study was a participatory one. Such tensions, in terms of defining PR and the nature participant roles take, have been explored in the literature (Seale 2012; Cook-Sather 2012; Black-Hawkins and Amrhein, 2014). Questions may be considered such as, should all



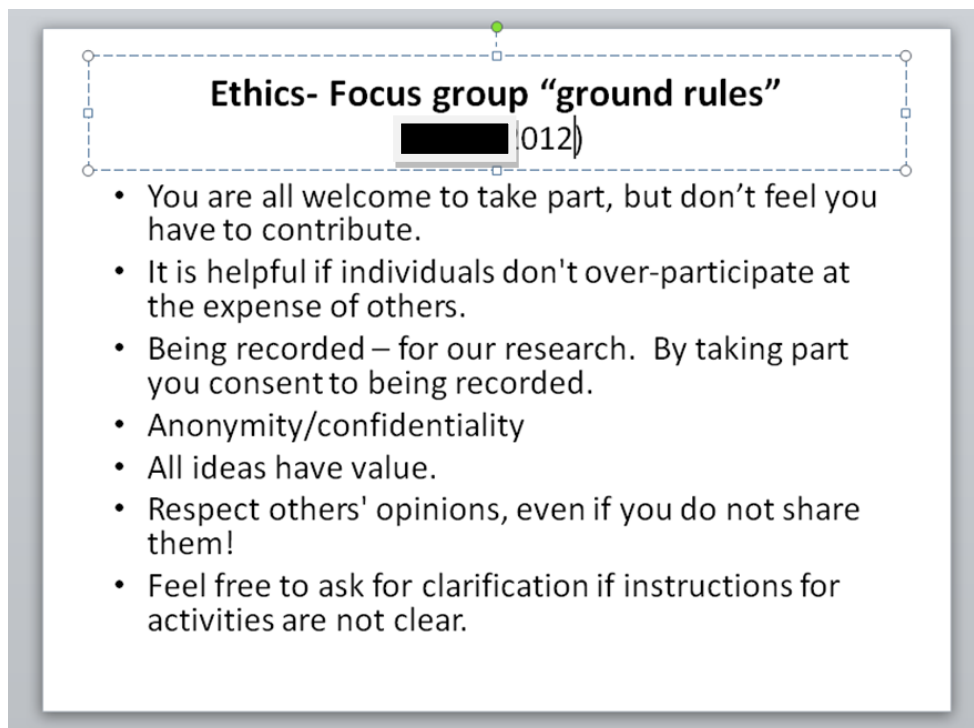
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participants be involved in the planning stage or is the academic researcher, with an established role within the academy, better placed to devise the study before engaging the views and input of other participants?

Much of the participatory research literature in the field of student experience problematizes the matter of role and agency, (Fielding 2001; Seale, 2010; Seale, Gibson, Haynes and Palmer 2014; Welikala and Atkin, 2014). There is also confusion in terms of how student participants are defined, whether they are positioned as participants, or alternatively, if conducting data analysis and dissemination, should their defined role be co-researcher or co-enquirer? Furthermore, given that such collaboration is likely to challenge traditional established ways of working, how, if at all, might this process disempower the academic researcher? Welikala and Atkin (2014, p. 390) claim, *participation of students in research as co-enquirers involved both risks and benefits mainly associated with the inherent difficulties with unequal power relationships, managing student agency and understanding multifaceted complexities that arise from shifting identities*. As cited earlier, there are studies which address the challenges of research in terms of disempowering sample populations and colonising respondents, yet it seems few explore the potential disempowering impact such a method may have on the qualified and experienced academic researcher.

Focus Groups (FG) present a range of ethical challenges (Smith, 1995). Researchers have little control over confidentiality beyond the FG; we cannot promise or ensure strict and absolute confidentiality as there is no control over what participants may disclose when they leave the group. Additionally, the FG activity was discussion and group work, so there was the possibility of participant stress caused by the intensity of such interaction. We set out to firstly establish ground rules and each centre's focus group made use of figure 1 at their first meeting. Participants were encouraged to feel comfortable within the group setting and it was made clear they were under no obligation to respond or contribute.

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**Figure 1: Focus group ground rules shared at first focus group with participants.**

Despite these precautions the submitted ethics form was returned by the ethics panel with a note of concern: 'How will the researchers manage their duty of care towards their participants? FG discussions could raise difficult issues leaving participants feeling upset'. It was suggested there was a need to provide signposting to support services in the university as our research was based on emotive issues. Ironically, during our research, it was revealed by a participant that their university support services were oversubscribed, a pattern also reflected in some of the other centres. Indeed, one student in University B stated that the university's response to mental health seemed to be *the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff as opposed to that awareness at the beginning*. This important point acknowledges that formal structures of support do not address ongoing emotions which happen in all spaces of the university including for example seminars, lecture rooms and the students' union.

Another student in University B suggested that emotional stress was a *usual* aspect of university life:... *I just fell apart. But it wasn't an unusual thing...It was leaving home and being on your own and there wasn't any awareness around what could happen and what might help protect you.*

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The fact that emotions and feelings emerged as a high ranking theme in the thematic analysis demonstrates that emotions were closely linked to FG discussions. A key example of an emotion being expressed, and recognised in others, during focus groups was anger at the university's (mis)handling of 'diversity': *anger and frustration, personally for me, and I've picked up from a few others...but not sure who to be angry and frustrated at, whether it should be the lecturer, the university, the world* [laughter from group] (University A).

FGs are not a natural occurrence and gatherings can cause discomfort. In initial conversations about research protocol centre facilitators expressed the view that something was needed to break the ice and enable productive conversations. Jowett and O'Toole in acknowledging this, point out that *[focus groups] might be social situations, they were not natural situations: these individuals were gathered together at my request* (Jowett and O'Toole, 2006, p. 458). Furthermore, they highlight how FGs have the potential to result in participants' collective isolation, discomfort and a view of the facilitator as the expert to be pleased (Jowett and O'Toole, 2006). That issue linked with our concern in terms of participant agency, the matter of our student participants feeling confident in terms of providing data and being involved in the data analysis.

During the planning stage, our New Zealand academic spoke of Maori protocols and practices of 'Kai' (food), and 'Korero' (shared talking) and how they play important roles when a group is meeting for the first time. We chose to embrace this suggestion, and Kai and Korero added a welcome at the start of our gatherings encouraging social engagement over lunch or a snack and freed up the space for informal group-wide discussion. The FG participants in each of the centres appreciated this, humorously illustrated by the final recorded words in University A's FG4: *anyone else want a king prawn with smoked salmon – the plate is over here with me!* This, it was felt, encouraged relaxation across the group and potentially productive discussion, sharing and debates as evidenced by University A's focus groups reflection: *Just talking to each other and listening to experiences taught us so much within the group and I think that while talking, we were open. The group members made a good match* (University D); *there was an openness and everyone took part* (University C).

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The work began with our expectation of insightful contributions from the student participants but we retained a sense that the academics- with research knowledge and experience- would remain core in terms of completing the analysis, confirming the findings and presenting the work. We envisaged recording FG conversations, transcribing and then conducting thematic analysis with student participant input as feedback rather than as co-researcher with the raw data. The more we engaged in the work the more we came to see the importance of our participants' input as co-researchers. The eight academics came to realise that to have done otherwise would have allocated us, and indeed the study, as none other than a colonising one, taking research ownership and potentially its value away from the very community the study was intended to be about. Therefore, we decided the best approach was to voice-record FG conversations and store them digitally on a secure online storage facility which only those invited; student participants and academics, could access. We invited each participant to listen to their group's conversation and draw out key themes in the weeks between the focus groups. Our student participants were charged with conducting their own thematic data analysis. We provided them with some basic guidance and advice in order to support their analysis:

*1/ listen to the recording, 2/ while listening, record thoughts/key words/interesting points on a scrap of paper, 3/ record general themes/interesting points/key words on a Word document, 4/ list several questions which you felt the discussion could have developed. To avoid biasing or manipulating the data I can't send you a concrete example (as this might influence your thinking). If you come along on Wednesday with a list of key themes/ideas/key words we will record these, and see if there are any similar themes that arise. (Email to FG students, February 2015.)*

Academics made themselves available for advice via email and phone call in between FGs as required. We devised an activity entitled 'thematic sharing and sorting' for use in the second FG. Emphasis was placed on grouping our themes through a sorting and agreeing activity where all members shared their thematic analysis and discussed patterns and challenges alongside agreeing on the key themes, see table 3. Similar approaches in participatory research have been used elsewhere (Seale, Gibson, Haynes and Potter, 2014),

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- 1) Each FG member is given a pack of 10 coloured cards/paper to write on, each member will have their own specific colour
- 2) They are invited to individually write/cite their key findings (which they will have brought with them) on their cards (one on each) and then distribute them on the floor.
- 3) The group are then invited to walk around and together compile the statements into thematic groups. Thus each thematic group will be multicoloured representing the different voices.
- 4) When that is completed, we go back to our seats in the circle and begin to record a FG conversation about 2 things, a) the process they have just been through and b) confirming what the key themes are.

**Table 3 –Instructions to centres regarding focus group two ‘thematic sharing and sorting’ activity**

Whilst undertaking the activity some interesting group work and reflections emerged from FG members. People sitting beside each other started to work together then across each other at the table. One of the students stated – *so you’re putting the same or very similar ones together* (University D).

When asked to evaluate the process of thematic analysis that had taken place several participants reflected on the value as well as challenge and complexity of the approach: *Because you can see what the other person wants to say. You can see that we could fit all the cards somewhere. [...] we express ourselves in different ways, but there are similarities in the things that we think about... we can find something in common and end up with conclusions* (University A). However, some found the process problematic: *I wish I’d written [themes/ideas] down more because when we were listening to [the previous recording] I thought I’d remember it, but I didn’t remember as much as I was expecting* (University A). Arguably this activity enabled certain views and experiences of our FG members to emerge. In our attempts as researchers not to lead, FG member knowledge was valued and some of their understandings plus insights shared.



Figure 2: Thematic analysis, University A

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Figure 3: University C participants' approach to thematic analysis

The approach of participants as co-researchers was a challenging experience as illustrated in the reflections of University C's FG facilitator:

*The categorizing of the themes from our FG1 discussion was a challenge for us. During the FG2, rather than identifying a linear group of categories the FG participants chose to represent themes in sequential, connected format. This caused academics to feel initially a bit uncomfortable as the spiral shape didn't conform to the "norm" of what a researcher might see as categorization. But then the intent of representing the themes in a chronological fashion, from high school to first years at the University to their current view, began to resonate as a legitimate way to represent the generated themes.*

This contrast in terms of analysing research data connects to the complexity and problematics shared earlier of student emotions being active everywhere- thus not effectively served in pigeonholing them to student services. Similarly, in terms of how students in University C chose to analyse the data, they challenged the linearity of traditional research, opting instead for a spiral approach where key points are not divided. They saw the data as much more connected.

The role of student represented a shifting configuration from participant and provider of data to that of participant and co-enquirer. Reflecting on the poignancy of this in relation to debates

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regarding power and the research process, Cook-Sather (2012; 358) argues: *To change their own form and place, researchers must be willing to reconceptualise themselves as not the only ones able or even the ones best positioned to discern and construct meaning in relation to student experiences.* The academics' reconceptualization as co-enquirers with our students repositioned us as external aides to their collective discerning and construction of meaning from FG data. Our cultural capital as researchers and academics was challenged and the traditional power alignment within the academy interrupted.

### **Discussion**

As implied earlier, there is much complexity in the discourse of inclusion and diversity in HE, not least the ways in which students are externally positioned and referred to. Connected to this is tension in the field of PR and how related studies position members, i.e. researcher and researched or co-researchers. Feedback from our study's participants suggested our work should be disseminated to university officials and academic staff. The students wanted their views and stories to be heard and in so doing felt this might make them agents for change, or at the very least raise the curtain on the complexities regarding 'diversity' and their externally positioned self. There was a sense that being involved in this work was just the start; some FG members hoped to encourage meaningful discussion and debate across stakeholders leading to the implementation of more effective student informed, practical measures. The privileging of their voices contributed to some taking up political positions within the university as student course reps and University ambassadors.

The challenges we encountered as academics, language, identity, labels, roles and agency, caused us to stop, reconsider and revise and in so doing work from a place accepting of education as both complex and troubled. Linked to that, the subsequent practices that evolved, in particular working with our students as co-data analysts, served to challenge the cultural capital induced power alignment of traditional research roles. Whilst it cannot be said we experienced a power-free form of research we certainly experienced a process where different identities and life stories shook the traditional research boundaries, and that element of the study makes a contribution to the field in terms of Nind's (2011) call for participatory interpretation and analysis.

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Cook-Sather (2012, p. 353), addressing the power of translation as metaphor and creator of meaning in relation to marginalised voices argues: *Recent feminist perspectives brought to bear on translation studies highlight the power of dynamics inherent in translation and the importance of focusing on previously neglected people, experiences and interpretation.* Her discussion on ‘translation connects with our methodological challenges. In a similar vein our decision to make room for these challenges and the subsequent discussions, and changes they caused, allowed various participant voices to be heard, and enabled the student participants to experience power and become a central part of the study’s meaning making. The student as co-enquirer served to challenge traditional, well-trodden forms of education research.

Welikala and Atkin (2014), writing in the context of HE, address the complexities and problematics of research with students. They note when studies use the term ‘student co-researcher’ or ‘student research participant’ the meaning is unclear. It is suggested these terms and related practices require further investigation, (Cook-Sather, 2007; Seale, 2010; Welikala and Aitkin, 2014). Whilst our study did not set out to be disruptive, we now align it with calls for political forms of methodology to embrace more disruptive approaches (Hall, 2014). Clarifying Welikala and Atkin state (2014, p. 392):

*While the use of the term ‘students as researchers’ in the literature usually refers to student involvement in research activities there is lack of any clear conceptualization of the term [...] Co-enquirers could be seen as part of a shifting configuration of knowledge production and consumption.*

One might argue our study placed central importance on the lives and experiences of ‘diverse’ students, seeking out those who were silent and involving those who were marginalized.

### **Conclusion**

To summarise, the paper provides insight into our experiences of conducting a PR study whose challenges mirrored the tensions surrounding the discourse of diversity and inclusion, specifically in relation to language, subject position or role, communication and power. We



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argue a number of key lessons can be taken from our study. Firstly, that experiencing challenges to an originally well-structured and ethically approved methodology is not something to fear when working within the remit of Participatory Research. Our experiences with shifting identities for example, from ‘student as participant’ to ‘student as co-enquirer’ added more depth and criticality to the research and it was also an empowering experience as noted elsewhere by the participants. The blurring lines of our identities and the disruption brought was at first experienced as problematic, however in the end it became a more liberating experience providing rich insights into the world and lives of our students. Our work and the knowledge it provides suggests future participatory research should embrace methodological challenges, seeing them as part of the political dynamic within the study, not a reactionary occurrence or difficulty to be ignored or silenced.

Secondly, in the drafting and redrafting stage of this article we experienced interruptions in terms of how to describe the students, were they still to be referred to as participants or now as co-researchers or was co-enquirer a more representative term to use? Yet again this ubiquitous issue of role identity and its inherent power problematics challenged our thoughts. Revisiting Cook-Sather on ‘translation’ she notes (2012, p. 352):

*Learners can be translated into co-researchers of educational experiences, translating researchers into partners with students in making meaning through the research process, and translating qualitative research’s approaches and modes of presenting findings into new versions of those processes and products.*

To date our student co-enquirers have contributed to, reviewed and presented national conference papers on this study with academics, they have reviewed this article and have been represented at an international education conference symposium.

Finally, and perhaps most poignantly, is the nature of our students’ politicisation and for many the decision to take this forward in their becoming active agents in HE. This aspect of our work is currently ongoing with continued student discussion and a changing profile in some of our FG participants, in one case from student to co-lecturer and in others from student to student year representative. Our student co-lecturer gives input on the experience of ‘coming out and

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the existence and impact of heteronormativity within education’ to students studying equality and schooling. Our new student year group representatives play key roles in the development of their academic programme and represent their year group voices on what works or does not work and where changes are needed. Some of these changes are linked to the meaning and representativeness of ‘diversity’ within the academic and practical work of their programme.

We have illustrated our responses to challenges encountered in our work. We have shown how they became discursive tools as well as something akin to a credibility check, i.e. if we position ourselves as pedagogues who work for social justice then we must respond to challenges in considered and inclusive ways. We acknowledge that most researchers will encounter difficulties in their research journeys; we advocate the acknowledgement of these and the allowance of them, rather than their camouflaging and suppression. Whilst firstly causing uncertainty regarding research methodology, our challenges ultimately added further criticality to the field, specifically to contemporary debates within PR; research ownership, power, process and impact.

**Funding**

This work was supported by the Higher Education Academy under grant number GEN 571.

**Acknowledgments:**

Dr Karen Beauchamp-Pryor for her input as the study’s co-investigator July-October 2013.

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